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# **THREE STORIES**

**BY**  
**HUMAYUN KABIR**



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FOR  
**SHREEMATI SAROJINI NAIDU**  
A dreamer whose dreams came true



## PRESTIGE

It was a casual acquaintance on a journey. Such acquaintances are made every day. They happen easily, and are more easily forgotten.

The train left Goaland at two in the afternoon and was scheduled to reach Calcutta at eight in the evening. For six hours one had to remain cooped up in a small compartment. In India one would spend the time in gossip and conversation. In England, one would sit in a corner, hold a newspaper before one's face and ward off inquisitive eyes or talk. Men have their own preferences, but at least Halim had definite ideas on the point. His ideas had been confirmed as a result of his six weeks' sojourn in England. He spent only six weeks, but to him it seemed an eternity. The hours were brobding-nagian and more tedious than years in one's own country. He wondered how men could live in such a country. Hours passed and people sat facing one another. But not one word was uttered. Not the slightest trace of a smile relieved the determination on glum faces. If ever one broke the silence it was only to comment on the weather. Silence would again reign thereafter.

What Halim found most objectionable in England was the shameless freedom of the women. They seemed to have no sense of modesty. Slight strips of coloured cloth stretched barely to their knees. Strong legs jutted out like banana trees. Arms uncovered, the throat exposed—Halim wondered why there was the pretence of any covering at all. Resentment burned in him as he

remembered their amazement and sly smiles at his own appearance. His dark face was framed in a darker beard. Clad in an outlandish garb of dark colour, he caused a sensation wherever he went. Young women giggled as they looked at him and nudged one another. They were loud and immodest even before a foreigner. Nor did they seem impressed by his dignified bearing. A painted creature had once accosted him at Piccadilly : 'Aren't you a sight, darling ?' Since then, Halim had been confirmed in his belief that all English girls were like that. He was not surprised. After all, there was no *purdah* in Britain. How then could women have a sense of modesty ? He even doubted if girls who went about could remain chaste. With his cronies he argued on the point. He would loudly declare that it was not for nothing that religion provided for guarding women in safe privacy. Needless to say, Halim's knowledge of scriptural text was confined to the recitation of a few verses whose meaning he could not understand.

Halim had married immediately after his return from England. His degree was only a B.A. from Calcutta, but he was after all 'England-returned'. In the marriage market of Muslim Bengal, his value can be easily understood. The dowry system was a devilish concoction of the infidel Hindu. A pious Muslim, how could Halim accept a dowry ? In any case, he had to settle a sum upon his wife. Halim, therefore, registered a *Qabin* for one thousand rupees. In return, he secured from his father-in-law the meagre sum of fifteen thousand, in furniture, property and other gifts. To his Hindu friends he boasted of his generosity. If he had been a

Hindu, he could have extorted from his would-be father-in-law at least ten thousand in cash. His friends did not know the story of the furniture and property and had to swallow Halim's taunts.

Halim's bride was what they would call an educated girl. In other words, she knew the alphabet and could read easy text-books like other girls in their early teens. In addition, she had read a few of the novels of Bankim and Romesh Dutt. She had also read the pure Muslim brand of novel concocted by Shiraji and Ismail. A few phrases like 'women's rights', 'chastity' and 'love' were also known to her. This was the result of occasional readings of the books of Tagore or Sarat Chandra Chatterjea. She was thus a modern girl and quite clever. But after all, she was only fourteen when she was married, and a girl of fourteen could have neither much experience nor thought. On the very first night of marriage, Halim lectured her on the duties of a true Muslim wife. She tried to argue, but this proved of small avail. Her arguments were stereotyped and Halim clinched the discussion by a final warning. He told her that if she proved too free or difficult, he would have no hesitation in applying to her the argument of force sanctioned by the tradition of centuries.

This was reasoning to which Ayesha had no reply. She agreed with Halim that seclusion and the *burqa* were signs of a woman's honour and that the highest duty of a wife was to carry out her husband's orders. Before the year was out she had learnt her lesson well. She would taunt her Hindu friends about their depraved ways. She argued that Hindu society was heading for ruin because

it had accepted from the West the shibboleth of women's freedom. If any one said that in spite of women's freedom, Europe seemed to prosper, Ayesha had a ready reply. Europe was doomed, she said, and great European scholars like 'Spelnour' (she meant Spengler) had even determined the date of Europe's dissolution. Needless to say that Ayesha was merely repeating what she had heard from Halim.

An infant wrapped in swaddling-clothes was on Ayesha's arm. A small urchin hung to her other hand. Encased from head to foot in a dark-black *burqa* and with only a narrow slit near the eyes, she looked like a walking tomb as she stood on the platform. The shapeless dark-black figure without limb or member had neither personality nor any distinguishing mark. If four or five such figures were stood side by side, it would be impossible to differentiate one from the other. As with blocks of brick or wood, their only difference was numerical. The pressure of seclusion and *purdah* assimilated them more and more to inanimate things. Ayesha had been married when she was fourteen. That was about three years ago. Already mother of two children, her health was not yet completely shattered. She had, however, crossed over from young girlhood to maturity at a single step. Seventeen brings with it the glamour of early youth, the promise of beauty yet unfulfilled. Mother of two children, hers was a beauty like that of the midday. Her youth was full and now awaited the beginnings of decay.

Halim bundled Ayesha and the children into an Inter class women's compartment. He lacked money but not a sense of propriety. Inadequate means compelled

him to travel Inter class, but he was particular that his family should remain aloof. How could he tolerate that his wife should behave like the shameless girls of other communities? They put their heads out of the window and kept their faces uncovered before strangers. Halim burned with resentment as he recalled how grown-up adults walked up to the women's carriage, stood on the steps, talked to their own women and cast sly looks from the corners of their eyes at other inmates. Halim was alive to these tricks, but he was not to be taken in. His orders, therefore, were strict. Even inside the women's compartment, Ayesha must never take off her *burqa* or uncover her face. Like a docile wife she had obeyed, though it cost her dear. Other women in the compartment laughed at her and ridiculed her. When the alternative to ridicule was loss of prestige and even more serious, her husband's wrath, what, poor girl, could she do?

We are, however, drifting from our story. We started with Halim as he put his wife into a women's compartment at Goaland. The living baggage safely deposited, he cast about to find a place for himself. There were not many passengers in the Inter class and he found a compartment that was almost empty. He untied his small bedding and carefully spread it on the seat. He took off his shoes, put his cap on the seat in front and spread himself comfortably. In one corner by the window, two young men were engaged in a hot discussion. Phrases like 'Sarat Chandra', 'woman's freedom', 'the future of India' drifted across. Halim shook his head and muttered to himself, 'College boys talking about things they don't understand!'

In another corner of the compartment a middle-aged gentleman opened his trunk. He took out his *hooka* and carefully prepared for a smoke. Halim looked at him and felt like going across. They would naturally fall into a conversation and he would ask for a smoke. Halim pulled himself up and thought, 'Suppose the man is a Hindu. How can I smoke from an infidel's *hooka*?' He suppressed his longing for a smoke and sat glum and silent. The smoker also cast a questioning look at him. Perhaps he also had similar thoughts. He could not drink water given by a Musalman, but was it a crime to smoke with a Muslim in the compartment? He sat back in his corner and tried to forget Halim. The gentle gurgle of the *hooka* soothed him and he continued to blow out rings of smoke.

The train was now due to start. Halim got down to the platform and made a final enquiry about Ayesha. The bell rang and the engine gave a sharp warning whistle. The last-moment rush and bustle shook the silence of the platform as the train roared out. The smoker had by now finished his smoke. He looked at Halim out of the corner of his eye and leaned back in his seat. Under his breath he muttered, 'Durga, Durga!' Halim returned the unfriendly look and turned away his eyes.

The train rumbled on. Above the roar of the train rose the voice of the two young men. Halim at first paid hardly any attention to them, but gradually he grew interested. From interest to participation was a short step. Soon he found himself entangled in their debate. Their discussion was about the social differences and religious principles of Hindus and Musalmans in

India.' They obviously belonged to different communities and yet it was hard to say which was which. Dressed in similar clothes, it was difficult for an outsider to differentiate between them. They wore an Indian shirt, made of *khaddar*. One was dyed green and the other saffron. In our report we may refer to them as Saffron and Green.

Saffron was saying, 'Whatever you may say, you can never have unity between Hindus and Muslims so long as the social differences are not removed. A pact is an external affair. It does not establish real unity of heart. A pact will last only so long as we have a foreign enemy. We must build up unity from the very basis. We must remove social differences and classes. All disabilities and differences between Hindu and Muslim must be removed.'

Green replied, 'No one denies what you say. But what are you going to do till you can build up unity at the base? Is not a pact better than the squabbles which disgrace our lives every day? Besides, how are you going to build up your unity without a pact? The process of unification must make a start some time. It can start only in an atmosphere of goodwill and amity. Establishment of that goodwill and amity is a pact. Besides, the differences in social customs and conduct are often great. You are talking of removing social disabilities between Hindus and Muslims, but why do you forget that these disabilities exist among the Hindus themselves? Let us first have unity among the Hindus. Then alone can we talk of establishing a common social code between Hindu and Muslim. Take for instance the case of women. Hindu

girls are securing some freedom today, but do you find any trace of it among contemporary Muslims ? And yet it was Islam that first gave social and legal rights to women.'

'What you say is no doubt true,' admitted Saffron. 'I do not, however, agree with you that there can be no unity among Hindus and Muslims until differences among Hindus themselves are removed. Reform in both directions must start simultaneously. We must remove the disabilities which divide one Hindu from another as well as those which divide a Hindu from a Muslim. You talk of social differences, but are they after all so great ? There is little freedom for women in Hindu society, nor is there much among the Muslims. Is that a reason why obstacles for social contact between them should be retained ? The easiest solution would, of course, be inter-marriage between the two. Unfortunately, however, neither the Muslim nor the Hindu is ready for this step. Even that will perhaps come one day. Without the union of Muslim and Hindu, there is no future for this country.'

'I am not prepared to go quite as far as that,' Green answered. 'After all, it does not matter if there is no inter-marriage between the two communities. Why should this prevent union in other spheres where economic, political and other interests coincide ? Where problems of health and food are identical, why should we insist on unity of blood as well ? If we demand the impossible, it will only prevent our doing what is feasible.'

Saffron replied : 'You have not understood me. I am not suggesting that you should compel Hindus and Muslims to inter-marry. If we were to wait till a new nation has thus been created, we should have to wait till

doomsday. If that were possible, there would then be no question of any union. If Hindus and Muslims were fused, they would become one. Can one unite with oneself? Today there are attempts at unity in all directions. Let us try it out in all spheres. Marriage is the supreme test. If the Hindu is willing to marry his daughter to a Muslim and, conversely, if a Muslim is willing to marry his daughter to a Hindu, then and then alone can one talk of real unity between them. Otherwise we shall only talk about Hindu-Muslim unity. When we return home, the Hindu will say, "Don't allow that dirty Muslim to come inside the room." The Muslim will say, "Let the infidel Hindu burn eternally in hell." Real unity can never be achieved in this way.'

Halim had so long listened in silence, but could now no longer contain himself. He intervened in their debate and said: 'What after all do you mean? Are you suggesting that we should give up Islam and be absorbed among the Hindus? We all know that quarrels are bad, but is that any reason why we must give up our faith? Is it not possible to maintain good relations even though we remain distinct and separate? You talk of marriage between Hindus and Muslims. Well, if the Hindu is willing to accept our faith, we do not mind marrying his daughter or marrying our daughter to him. But to talk of marriage while a Hindu remains a Hindu? Whoever heard of such nonsense! Of course, it is not so bad if a Muslim marries a Hindu girl. But to marry our daughter to a Hindu—that is impossible!'

Green was about to make some comment when Saffron interrupted him and said: 'Yours is no doubt a fine

arrangement ! You don't mind marrying a Hindu girl, but all your objection is to marry your daughters to Hindus. Why should Hindus agree to such one-sided marriages ?'

'What the Hindu may think is no concern of mine,' retorted Halim. 'I don't want to marry the daughter of a Hindu. I am only saying that of the two evils, this is the lesser. In any case, it is undesirable to establish any relationship with an infidel.' He paused for a moment and added : 'Where, in any case, are you going to find a Hindu who will marry his daughter to my son ? You are talking big, but will you marry *your* daughter to *my* son ?'

Green burst out laughing. Saffron looked at him and said : 'If I had a daughter, I would not mind giving her in marriage to your son. Before I do so, I must, however, satisfy myself that my daughter will be able to live in comfort in your house. I cannot tolerate my daughter being shut up in a cage like a captive bird. If I am satisfied that you will not interfere with the freedom of my daughter, I would not mind my daughter marrying into your family. But let alone the question of Hindus and Muslims. Will a Muslim marry his daughter to you unless he is satisfied that she can live in honour and happiness in your house ?'

Halim's face turned copper-red with indignation. 'Your heads have been turned by reading a few pages of English,' he declared vehemently. 'That is why your society is losing all sense of shame and propriety. Grown-up girls come upon the stage and exhibit themselves in the name of dance recitals. Do you prefer such hussies to modest girls of gentle families ? What you call a captive

bird in a cage is a girl of a respectable home. They are a million times better than those Anglicized creatures who flaunt about the streets. If you went to Europe, you would see how far shamelessness can go. I was like you at one time. I used to read novels by Hindu authors. I too shouted about free love and free rights. Europe has cured me of all such fads.'

Saffron burst out laughing. 'We are not talking of free love and free rights. And in any case, rights are never free—rights always have duties attached to them. But won't you tell us some stories of your free love and free rights ?'

Halim glared at him in wrath but did not reply.

'I too have been to Europe,' observed Green. 'I know something about conditions there. I do not think what you say is true. What country is there where you don't find abuses and excesses? Don't you come across immorality and social evils in spite of all your seclusion and coverings? Don't you read in the newspapers reports of rape, abortion and adultery? How long did you stay in Europe that you pass such sweeping judgements? We have spent years there and seen and travelled through many countries. Do you know what I have felt? I never imagined that women could be so pure and show such capacity for service. All my days in Europe I admired their self-confidence and reliance upon themselves. Hasn't it struck you that if we can't trust our mothers and sisters and daughters, there is no one we can trust? To me it seems that distrust of woman is a symptom of meanness and cowardice. In our country, we have turned women into living baggages. Until we transform them

into living beings, all our talk of freedom and liberty is bound to remain mere day dreams.'

Halim was getting angrier and angrier. He burst out, ' You should learn to talk with respect about those who are your betters. How can a gentleman bring his daughter out in the street ? When ever does a girl of good family want to come out of *purdah* ? This, after all, is the only difference between a gentleman and common folk. Do you want to abolish even that distinction ?'

' So you believe in the distinction between gentlemen and common folk ! ' exclaimed Saffron. ' The distinction between *Ashraf* and *Atrاف* is according to you sanctioned by Islam ? Is that why the Prophet said time and again that all men are equal and that he himself was an ordinary mortal like anybody else ? But why go so far back ? You say that no girl of respectable family wants to go out. How after all can she ? If you keep a bird long enough in a cage, it will even after release come back to its cage. A tutored parrot can only repeat what it has learnt. After all, are our women very different from parrots ? '

Halim flared up. ' It is no use talking to you at all. Aren't you ashamed to compare your own sisters and daughters to parrots in a cage ? Is this a sign of your culture and education ? '

' Why this sarcasm ? ' protested Saffron. ' Aren't you ashamed to keep your own mother, sister or daughter in a cage ? Why this lack of faith in one's own dearest ones ? Why this system at all ? I cannot think of any custom so evil and degrading as the *purdah* which obtains in India.'

Halim turned away in disgust, remarking, 'This may sound very well in your new-fangled, modernized Hindu society, but it won't do even among real Hindus. You who have read a few pages of English and turned into Brahmos are no more Hindus than a buffalo is a cow. And in any case, such shamelessness will not be tolerated in Muslim society.'

Saffron burst out laughing. ' You are labouring under a huge mistake. I am not a Hindu at all and certainly not a Brahmo. I am as much a Muslim as you are. Like you, I also have been abroad. Only I stayed a little longer and have seen a bit more of Europe. My England was not confined to a vision of Piccadilly after dark.'

Halim did not reply and muttered half articulately : ' Rank atheist and infidel!'

The train had by now reached Poradah. Hardly had it stopped, before another figure clad in flowing *jubba* and adorned with a dark beard and moustache rushed into the compartment. The newcomer pushed a steel trunk in and rushed out once more. Halim came out on the platform and asked Ayesha if she needed anything. There he again met the newcomer. He also had with him a figure shrouded in black *burqa* with one child on her arm and another hanging on to her hand. In spite of his devotion to *purdah*, Halim never missed a chance to look at any female that passed before his eyes. He looked at the shrouded woman, but only saw the shapeless outline of a dark, black figure. About the same size and figure as Ayesha, he could only guess that she was young. All this took hardly a moment. He spoke a few words to

Ayesha and came back to his compartment followed by the newcomer. Like draws like, and the newcomer came and sat by his side.

They struck up a conversation as the train moved out. Soon the conversation developed into intimacy. They found that they thought alike and had a similar outlook on life. They were equally keen about the seclusion and chastity of women, and boasted of their devotion to the cause of *purdah*. Halim learnt that the newcomer's name was Bashiruddin, that he was a jute broker who lived in Calcutta. He had come to attend a marriage near Poradah. Halim told him all about himself and did not forget to mention that he had been to England. He spoke sarcastically of the shamelessness of English girls. By way of a dig at the young collegians in the compartment, he said : 'Of course those who delight in such things find *purdah* an obstacle. Abolish *purdah*, encourage girls to come out on the stage, introduce ballroom dances, and our young hopefuls will be satisfied. That is what they mean by Indian freedom. So long as there are men like you and me, we will never tolerate such excess.'

' You are perfectly right,' agreed Bashir. ' So long as we are alive, we will never tolerate such goings on. Look at my wife for instance. She has never talked to a grown-up man other than myself. Her father died when she was young. Her mother was my aunt and left her to my care. I trained her up and married her in due course. That was almost ten years ago. Since then she has never come out before a stranger. If prestige is lost, what remains ? It is better we should die. In trains

nowadays, people have hardly any sense of modesty or decorum. Grown-up men go right inside women's compartments. On the pretext of talking to their own women, they cast sly glances at other people's wives. I never allow my wife to take off her *burqa* even inside the compartment. She puts on her *burqa* when she comes out of her house, she takes it off only after we have returned.'

Halim felt elated. He had at last found a man after his own heart. He looked at Saffron from the corner of his eye. Aloud he observed, 'You are perfectly right, sir! How can we maintain our faith unless we are prepared to suffer for it? It is only because of men like you that Islam has not yet lost its glory. I also try to keep my wife in strict *purdah*. She also does not take off her *burqa* even inside the compartment. My wife was what you call modern and educated. She has read a few novels of Bankim, Sarat and Damodar. On the very first night of marriage, I made it clear to her that I would not tolerate such nonsense. If she wanted to read, there was the Quoran and Hadis. I might relax to the extent of allowing the stories of Sonabhan or Jaigun. As for books by infidels—God bless my soul—no! She at first tried to argue with me. She spoke about women's freedom and the rights of wives. I soon convinced her that she must give up such nonsense and live according to the strict laws of the *Shariat*.'

'Your wife must then be beautiful,' said Bashiruddin. 'It was because her beauty made her vain that she dared to argue with you.'

Halim felt pleased to hear his possession praised. With mock-modesty he replied, 'She is not exactly a fairy,

but neither is she bad-looking. It is not proper for me to praise my own wife, but her relatives say that she is exceptionally pretty.'

'I had already realized that,' Bashir brought out with gusto. 'The moment you said that your wife talked about women's freedom, I knew that she must be proud of her looks. You know that women and dice are equally uncertain. Once they go out of your hands they never return. Hindus say that women are the cause of all evil. Though rank infidels, they have for once spoken the truth.'

The train stopped at Chuadanga. Halim and Bashir got down to look after their respective charges. On going to the women's compartment, they found that the two girls had struck up a friendship. One does not often meet such shrouded figures inside a railway carriage. Ridicule from other passengers had driven the two closer. The two husbands separated their respective *burgas* and, after a few words, returned to their own compartment.

Conversation ranged over all subjects under the sun. It was mostly Halim who talked. He had rarely found so sympathetic and understanding a listener as Bashir. Whatever he said, Bashir applauded. It went to Halim's head like strong wine. He addressed his words to Bashir, but his real objective was the young collegians.

'It is because *purdah* has been loosened that Muslim society is in danger,' he said. 'All the divines and elders of society must unite to stop this nonsense. We cannot sacrifice the faith and knowledge of seven hundred years for the sake of a few hot-headed young rascals.'

Halim spoke with pride of his love of *purdah*. He was training up the little girls of his family in strict *purdah*.

He told Bashir how he had gradually broken his wife till she was as docile and fond of *purdah* now as any village girl.

The train reached Ranaghat. The two young men got down and bade Halim farewell. He made the slightest inclination of the head in return. Bashir glanced at them and asked, 'Who are they? Hindu modernists?'

'I wish, they had been,' replied Halim. 'But no, they are, to our shame, Muslims in name. These creatures are destined to suffer in this world and the hereafter through their imitation of the infidels.'

Bashir shook his head in wise acquiescence.

They passed the time in discussion and light talk till the train reached Calcutta. When Bashir heard that Halim was going to a hotel, he protested and invited him to his own house. Halim declined with thanks as he had already made arrangements at the Islamia Hotel in Kolutola. Bashir gave him his own address and asked Halim to come and see him without fail.

The exit from the platform was narrow and there was a large crowd. Coolies with huge packages on their heads pushed and jostled one another. Men shouted and cursed as they gradually worked their way towards the gate. The two friends collected their trunks, bundles and wives and slowly advanced towards the gate through the crowd. With one hand each held his son, while with the other he led his shrouded wife who marched behind. The poor wife had an infant in arms. Hindered by the *burqa* which engulfed her, she could hardly keep in step. The party slowly approached the gate. For a moment Halim let go Ayesha's hand to fetch the tickets out of

his pocket. They had almost reached the gate when there was a last-moment rush. For a few seconds all Halim could do was to keep his balance and hold his son by the hand. Anxious and worried, he cast his eyes back over his shoulder. He was reassured to find the dark shrouded figure close behind him. Bashir was almost by his side. He too was slowly advancing through the crowd with his veiled wife behind him. He looked at Halim and muttered curses at the unruly crowd and its lack of manners.

By now they had come out of the gate. Bashir hailed a waiting taxi, put his son into it and waved farewell to Halim. The crowd had parted the two friends and they wended their respective ways. Halim engaged a phaeton. On all sides were hundreds of lights. The pavements were crowded with shoppers of all description. Below, was the dance of lights, but the sky above was dark with clouds.

Hardly had the phaeton entered Bowbazar before Halim shouted to the coachman to stop. It took a little time to check the horses and the carriage covered some more ground. Halim could not brook the delay and shouted petulantly, 'Why aren't you stopping the phaeton, you bastard ?'

The coachman had now brought the carriage to a stop. He flared up at Halim's abuse and retorted: 'Shut up, you country yokel. Don't you know it takes some time before a moving carriage can be stopped ?'

Halim shouted frantically: 'I am undone, completely undone ! How ever could I make such a mistake ? I have

lost my wife in the crowd. Turn the phaeton round and drive to No. 26, Mirzabagan.'

The coachman burst out into a ribald laugh. He sniggered: 'What is it you ~~were~~ saying? You have lost your wife? What next?'

Indignantly Halim replied: 'It's no concern of yours. I have asked you to drive to Mirzabagan. You had better go there.'

The coachman restrained himself with an effort. He turned the carriage as he said, 'Mirzabagan is a long way off.'

The carriage rumbled along drearily. Inside the carriage, the woman in *burqa* was sobbing disconsolately. Halim hardly knew what to do. He could neither speak to her nor offer any word of solace.

Time dragged on in interminable length. At last the carriage reached Mirzabagan. A servant rushed out, but stopped abruptly on seeing Halim. 'Has Bashir Mia returned home?' enquired Halim.

The servant replied: 'Master was due to return home today. The mail must have come long ago. When I heard your carriage, I thought he had returned.'

Halim felt the earth slipping from under his feet. He could only say: 'Bashir Mia has not returned home?'

It occurred to him that Bashir too had discovered the mistake only after the taxi had moved off. Perhaps Bashir had gone to the Islamia Hotel in search of him. To the servant he said: 'Your mistress is in the carriage. Take her in and when Bashir Mia returns, tell him that Mr Halim called on him.'

The servant hardly knew what to say and kept gaping at Halim. As soon as Mrs Bashir had got down from the carriage, Halim shouted to the coachman, 'Now to Kolutola!' The carriage moved slowly on. Halim's little son began to whimper. Again and again he asked, 'Where is mother, where has she gone?' Halim sat silent without a word.

After what seemed an eternity the carriage reached the Islamia Hotel. Halim got down and was told that a married couple had come to the hotel and enquired about him. On hearing that he had not yet come, they had gone away.

Halim was now feeling a little nervous. After all, one never knew these Calcutta people. Men who talked too much of morality were not infrequently dangerous. He recalled stories of smuggling and other secret vices in the city. He half-thought that he would go straight to the police and lodge information about his lost wife. He thought better of it, however, and once again turned towards Mirzabagan.

Hardly had the carriage entered Bashir's compound before Halim jumped out. It was infinite relief to him to find Bashir coming out. Bashir burst out laughing and exclaimed: 'You look like a ghost, but after all you need fear no more. Your wife is all right. How on earth could you ever make such a mistake?' He roared with laughter. Now at last Halim also joined in his laugh.

'You would not accept my invitation but fate ordained otherwise,' added Bashir. 'Since you are here, you are going to stay here.'

In their room, Halim raved at Ayesha. His fury was the greater as he had to speak in a muffled voice. 'Were you blind?' he cried out. 'Did you not see with whom you were going? How could you go with a stranger?'

Ayesha returned with spirit: 'Haven't you always told me I must keep my eyes to the ground and never look up? I was all the time behind you. I looked at the ground as you insist. How could I know that you had changed places with him?'

Halim felt that he really had no reply.

June, 1930

## MARZEENA

### I

We may question the proportions of sorrow and joy in human affairs, but about the dominance of comedy there can be no question. This is the simple fact, though we often overlook it. We become so entangled in the web of pleasure and pain that we lose the power to look at the comedy of life. Even the desire to laugh is washed away in tears. Perhaps with human beings, it cannot be otherwise. Marzeena, when she left her husband in bitterness and frustration, therefore, wept. If the comic spirit had sway over human hearts, she and her husband would both have laughed at life's irony. They would then have seen that the curtain had dropped only to rise on another scene.

Such incidents do not often happen in Muslim Bengal. Let alone Muslim society, such incidents are rare even in the Indo-Anglian society of the day. Perhaps you will smile with derision and say that such things cannot happen with us. Parents here begin to plan the marriage of their children within a few years of their birth. Even for the boys, these years rarely extend beyond the teens. Some attend to their studies, some do not, some drop out. Those who continue with their classes pass their matriculation at any age between fifteen and twenty. Thereafter follow new siftings and new shiftings. Some go to college, others go out in search of jobs. Whether they find a job or continue their studies, speculation on

the marriage market begins. The young men also begin to have their dreams. The dry ledgers in their office and the text-books of their study are tinged with visions of romance and beauty.

On the whole, the boys are lucky. The life of the girls is still more constrained. Many no doubt teach their daughters the three R's. Young collegians prefer brides who know at least the alphabet. It is easier to marry off a girl if she can read and write. It is thus more economical to invest in a girl's education. So the girls go to school or read at home. But how much can a girl married off before she is fifteen learn? With marriage disappears whatever little education she has had. The burden of domestic life falls on her. Soon children begin to come, and often they come every year. Where is the time or the energy left for education, music or culture? You will say that this is the picture of Muslim society in Bengal. Where then is there scope for a story like the one I propose to tell?

I do not deny what you say. It is difficult to believe Marzeena's story. What you say about Muslim society is also true. But you should remember one thing. If you once begin to question what is possible and what impossible, you will soon find that everyday standards will no longer do. After a while, you will begin to doubt what is real and what unreal. Have we not in our lives experienced things that are stranger than fiction? Only when the actual is coloured by imagination does it win credence as fact.

There is another point. If it were not unusual, why should I build a story round it? Our lives drag with

monotonous regularity. Every morning we wake up and every night we go to sleep. We eat when we are hungry and drink when thirsty. But no one ever writes a story about such things. Does it matter then that we do not often come across a Marzeena in Bengal? Perhaps some will find it difficult to believe her story, but can scepticism turn fact into fancy?

Can you deny that even in Bengal exceptions occur? Do we not find that the routine of our life is at times challenged? Rebels are born who say that they will obey no law but of their own choice. They carve out their own path and do not hesitate to violate conventions. They deem it foolish to break the heads of men in order to save the heads of oxen. They doubt if a woman loses her virtue if she comes out in the open air. They even question if heaven and hell are exactly as they are portrayed by the village priest. Perhaps such doubt and questioning are not common in Bengal, but can you say that such doubters never exist? Once questioning begins, can you ever lay down its limits?

But we have strayed far from Marzeena and her fortunes. When in bitter tears and anguish she left her husband's home, she found no ground for laughter there. She only saw the intolerable burden of a lonely life. Once she had accepted the challenge of life in joy and pride. She had had her comrade by her side and had found strength and fortitude in his love. Now their ways had parted and she saw stretching before her the empty road. Loneliness had never troubled her before. Today every inch of life's journey was filled with misery. Her marriage with Mahbub and its unforeseen sequel was the tragedy of her life.

## II

The story begins several years ago. Marzeena was budding into a young woman at the end of a protected and happy girlhood. Her father was one of the 'England-returned'. He would not hear of child-marriage and believed in giving girls the opportunity to develop and grow. Marzeena lived her life in carefree joy, with no one to check the exuberance of youth. Dr Alam had lost his wife when Marzeena was a mere baby. All his love and affection was centred upon the motherless girl. Brought up and trained in England, Dr Alam was, in addition, a teacher of philosophy. It was natural he should be indifferent to many of the current social and religious conventions. Partly it was indifference, partly it was scepticism born of philosophic speculation. He had also the philosopher's detachment and never tried to impose his own opinions on others. He was content to leave others alone and all that he wanted was that he also should be left alone. Moving from one college to another, he passed his days without worry or care. The only problem outside philosophy that ever troubled him was the changing whims of Marzeena.

Marzeena was then sixteen. The mystery of impending youth hung over her. Like the shadow of clouds at the advent of July. Motherless from her infancy, she was her own mentor. No one had prepared her for the onset of youth. Or the nuance of emotions that now swept through her heart so ceaselessly and so causelessly. It was as if the cycle of seasons was ringing changes in her life. She became a standing puzzle to her father. He

felt helpless when the restless and playful girl suddenly changed into a young maiden. Her sadness with its mystery and tears troubled him. How could he know that such play of emotions in a maiden's heart was only a sign of approaching youth ?

Neither Dr Alam nor Marzeena was fully conscious of these changes or their significance. They could not, however, be concealed from outside eyes. Many among his students used to visit Dr Alam at his home. Among them, Mahbub was the most constant. He used to come and discuss problems of metaphysics and philosophy. In the library or on the verandah, the discussions would continue for hours. The afternoons lengthened into dark evenings. Like many others, Mahbub was first attracted by the problems of philosophy. Soon there appeared another cause for his regular attendance. Marzeena was often present at these discussions. Sometimes she even attempted to join in them. It was during these discussions that Mahbub first noticed her. One afternoon, he saw with sudden joy the glow of intelligence on the maiden's face. He seemed to see for the first time the grace and beauty of her youthful figure. Suddenly their eyes met and he turned his eyes away. Instinctively Marzeena also lowered her eyes and looked away.

Who can control the growth of love in early youth ? All the heart is then expectant for its first appearance. We are then in love with love itself. All we need is to meet someone who can serve as an object. Till now Mahbub had only dreamt of love. It was an imaginary maiden he had adorned with all the hopes and yearnings of his heart. He had imaged her in a thousand forms

but all his creations seemed pale before Marzeena. He discovered that until now he had only indulged in dreams. Reality was more splendid than his fondest imagination. It was before him, and yet concealed by a cloak of illusion.

The world suddenly appeared new and young to Mahbub. He felt as if his eyes had been hooded with a dark, black cloak. Through it he had seen objects vaguely and indirectly. Today that screen had disappeared. He saw for the first time the beauty and wonder of the world. In spite of her thousand years, the world still bloomed in youth and loveliness.

The discussions centred that day round the problem of knowledge. Dr Alam was a pure idealist. He argued that commonsense knowledge cannot stand the scrutiny of intellects like Kant, Sankara or Bradley. That was the burden of his song, but he could hardly convince his pupils. They were all young men of the twentieth century. Through their veins coursed the impetuous blood of youth. How could they so readily accept that this world and its knowledge are mere illusion? They used the arguments of modern realists to refute Dr Alam's point. Foremost among them was Mahbub till suddenly he saw a new light in Marzeena's eyes.

His comments and arguments became disjointed and haphazard. He felt in his heart a new music—a music that knew neither beginning nor end and was full of its own splendour and joy. When the mind soared, how could he continue with the careful ploddings of reason? The intellect must measure every step, but faith can cross mountains in its stride.

Mahbub turned to Dr Alam and said, 'I have never accepted your words before, but today my whole heart responds to the teachings of Plato. Prisoners in a dark cave, we see the fire burning near its mouth. We cannot go across that fire into the bright sunlight of the open sky. All that we can see are shadows that dazzle and blind us. On the walls of the cave are reflected the forms of the outside world. In the uncertain glow of fire these shades flicker and shake.'

To himself he said, 'But there are a fortunate few who pass through that fire and go beyond. They can look reality in the face and today I have joined their band.'

Mahbub was the leader of the young sceptics who debated with Dr Alam. His sudden conversion daunted them. They could not regroup their points and the discussion flagged. Soon they left one by one, Dr Alam wondered what had happened. To Marzeena he said, 'Did you see, little mother mine, how all their arguments were swept away by the irrefutable logic of Sankara ?'

### III

Mahbub had never known conflict in his world. Nor had he been troubled by doubt, suspicion or misery. Like others, he also had his experience of pleasure and pain. Who in this world is free from bondage ? The infant is broken-hearted if it cannot get the bauble for which it stretches out its arms. The little girl weeps as if her heart will break when her toys are damaged.

Who will say that her tears are less bitter because they are for dolls? We regard such sorrow as trivial because it leaves no permanent impress. It is like writing on the sands by the sea. However deep the scar, the tide of life washes them clean and smooth.

Till now such had been Mahbub's experience. His sufferings had never entered into the core of his life, for they were based on intellectual discontent. We are proud of our intellect. It is reason that distinguishes us from other animals. We may even say that reason is the truest development of man and the pursuit of truth his highest ideal. Life, however, mocks our pride. Every crisis proves that the intellect is a recent and accidental growth in the process of evolution. It has no utility except as an instrument for solving the problems presented by the deeper urges of life. How else can such stupidity mark the relations of men? Such colossal unreason in the conflicts which tear human society and state? Life and death, hunger and food, love and hatred, friendship and enmity, fill up our lives. Are these feelings and relations subject to reason? Do they not employ reason as their slave? If the mind were really rational, the problem of human love and hate would not have baffled us. The understanding is only a servant of life. It obeys life's commands, but the commands come from the inmost depths of personality and stir emotions that are as deep as they are formless.

Before Mahbub appeared a new light. He saw that he had till now sat on the brink of life. He had seen only the paint on the outer facade of life's structure. Behind the outer facade lay mansions with many apartments,

Light and shade, splendour and misery were interspersed there in strange chiaroscuro. Till now he had never known that there were depths behind the surface of life. To dive too deep into the mysteries of life is dangerous but also has its thrills. The diver sees oysters under the depths of the sea and brings them up to search for pearls. Often his search is vain. Sometimes he dives too deep and does not return. Sometimes he finds a pearl more precious than all the riches of the world.

It is a common joke that young men in love take to poetry. Mahbub also had laughed before, but now he realized the meaning of such conduct. The language of poetry creates deep emotion in us. Even trivial things become precious in the alchemy of art. Is it then surprising that a man should break into poetry to express himself when he discovers new meanings in the little things of life? When casual words and a passing smile are charged with deep significance? When little incidents and suggestions are tuned to the deepest mysteries of life?

How can we forget that the best stories deal with the oldest topics of the heart? If phantasy alone could fashion a great story, then an opium-eater's den would have been the source of the greatest stories of the world. All great truths are trite. How can we then have great stories if we leave out the common feelings of man? The conventional has no place in art, but art seeks to charge conventions with meaning. How then can we omit in art what is old and eternal?

Mahbub started to show all the age-old symptoms of love. He had laughed at other men in love, but how could he laugh at himself? All his old values were

transformed. We do not easily learn that all valuation is in the interests of life: outside the limits set by life they have neither significance nor validity. We change ourselves and do not realize that change alone is real. Instead, we cling to the new forms with the old pathetic faith and begin to use them as unchanging standards' for the measure of life's novelty.

Mahbub also was transformed. Until now, he had believed in materialism with all the intensity of his heart. In the thoughtless confidence of youth, he had declared that like other mechanisms, the human being is a physical machine. He had held that with increase in our knowledge, we should one day understand and control all the activities of men. Their innermost habits and emotions and impulses. Not that the reasoning was conclusive. The pride of youth made him feel that there could be no limit to knowledge or achievement. He mocked at fate and said, 'We have solved the mysteries of matter. Now we shall translate human beings into units of logic and understand them like symbols of mathematics.' It never struck him that throughout these adventures of the mind, the self as subject remained outside.

The vanity of youth must some day meet its doom. When he looked at Marzeena and discovered in her a new being, he suddenly seemed to feel that the achievements of science were a mockery, that the claims of philosophy were worthless. He only saw dark eyes that concealed unfathomed depths. In their limitless cavity, he saw a burning flame. How could thought express its mystery ? Suddenly, he realized the soul which dwells beyond the body and defies all chemical analysis. Till now he had

only dreamed and played with the bloodless categories of the intellect. For the first time, he now faced truth and saw the reality of the human soul. It might look only like the graceful figure of a young maiden, but he knew that it contained the very significance of life.

## IV

Marzeena was troubled by no such thought. Bands of young men came every day to her father and joined in discussions with him. They would not stop even when they were beaten in debate. Often they would argue for argument's sake. She had seen Mahbub among them, but she had never noticed him. Why should she pay any special attention to him? Perhaps the young men watched her. The only girl in the company, she naturally attracted attention, and some of them had already started to dream of love.

Marzeena was the only child of the philosopher and a motherless child at that. Enveloped in her father's affection, she had never felt the need of love from any one else. She did not even know that there could be love of any other kind. From her childhood she had listened to discussions of knotty problems of philosophy. All the men around her were engrossed in such problems. Outside metaphysics, they had hardly any interest. The quarrels and reconciliations of childhood foreshadow the love and hatred of adult life. Marzeena, however, had had no play-mates of her age. She had never stayed for long at any one place. How then could she find friends?

Or form the attachments that train the normal child for future social life ?

Marzeena had never taken any special notice of Mahbub. Why after all should she ? Mahbub was one among the young men who came to her father. Maybe he was a little more talkative than others. Perhaps he was a little cleverer. How many notice the minor distinctions that give to each man his individuality ? Those whom we do not know seem all alike. We can hardly differentiate between one Chinese and another, or for the matter of that, even between a Chinese and a Japanese. It is only when our curiosity is roused that we regard each object in its own distinctive character. Love adds new intensity to our vision. We begin to notice particulars that had escaped our attention before. Both the good and the evil are magnified and reveal to us the complex character of those we love.

Mahbub was one among other young men. Marzeena looked at them in the mass and saw all of them indistinctly. She had not looked at any as an individual. Nor had she felt any urge to do so. From the point of view of emotional development, she was yet a child. The world of the child circles round its mother. All others who come into its world remain irrelevant and detached. Marzeena's world centred on her father. There was as yet no room for anybody else in it. She felt the advent of youth in her body. Its mystery and shadow glimmered at the margin of her consciousness. But her mind was yet young and innocent. The curse of loneliness had not yet touched her. She was still complete in herself.

Mahbub had suddenly looked at her and his eyes had filled with a strange light. Marzeena had for a moment been startled. The appeal in his eyes did not, however, evoke any response in her heart. In light-hearted curiosity, she wondered if she had ever seen such a look before. When Mahbub abandoned his disputation and suddenly accepted all the contentions of Dr Alam, she felt both amused and pleased. She also felt a little proud that the impatient youth who dared to contradict her father had at last accepted defeat. When the young men grew heated in debate, she often lost patience and thought, 'They know little and understand less, and yet they dare argue with my father!'

We light one lamp from another and there is a carnival of light. There are human beings who find joy in everything and bring joy to others. Life extends to them an aspect of laughter and joy. They light the world with the radiance of their heart and do not seek to store for themselves the joy they derive from life. They are often self-centred, but are so full of joy that we do not condemn them. They are content to weave their sorrows and joys into a self-contained pattern of life. They are not disturbed by the problems of good and evil or the giant agony of the world. And yet the world welcomes them for the sweetness and light they scatter around.

Marzeena belonged to this carefree race. She had nobody in the world but her father. She did not have to worry for others nor curtail her own demands to satisfy their needs. And her father was a philosopher immersed in his thoughts. The world of ideas was more real to him than his everyday life. Outside that world, his only

object of care was Marzeena. And he had never refused any of her wishes. Marzeena had come to look upon him as an instrument of her happiness. She no doubt loved him intensely, but it was not love for another human being. She loved him as an element of her own life. Not that she had developed this attitude consciously. Her unbalanced individuality regarded everyone else as a mere adjunct to her life. She was the centre round which revolved all the men and things in her world.

In spite of all his deliberate materialism, Mahbub also lived in his dreams. When he fell in love, it was with one who was a dweller in the world of dreams.

## V

The chaffings of his friends discovered to Mahbub that he was in love. Marzeena appeared to him in a new light, but he did not know that this was what men called love. His friends would not, however, let him remain unconscious to the change in himself. Dreams at times dim our eyes and lend new colour to our hearts, but they are only nebulous feelings. They may contain the promise of a future solar system, but who would regard it as the earth with its fruits and flowers and green abundant life? Often the world remains unborn. The nebula remains a nebula and is lost in the eternal void of space. It is only when a new star approaches the nebula that gravitation finds a field of play. New forces emerge through their clash and conflict. The nebula ceases to live in its gaseous dreams. A new world is born in the splendour of flames.

The ocean-girdled earth launches her eternal adventure of youth. Mahbub's emotions would perhaps have remained nebulous and uncertain. His dreams might have slowly faded like the light mist of an early winter morning, but how could it be so with friends always after him?

The raillery of his friends made Mahbub realize that this was love. The discovery soon permeated all his consciousness. His dreams became more definite. His emotions found a new direction and urgency. The yearnings of his heart were no longer vague. They became definite and were transformed into desire. The confidence of youth proclaimed that life had chosen him for victory—who could resist his forward march? He felt as if the world waited in expectancy for him. It was for him that the maiden grew in beauty and grace. If only he came and knocked, all doors would open. The princess of eternal youth would come out and crown him with the laurel of victory.

The human heart is not like a public road and does not move in a straight line. It is more like a river that meanders and curves upon itself in its course. It hits sand-banks and forms eddies. At times it even flows in a contrary direction. Sometimes we find cross-currents that oppose one another. The timidity of youth enhances the diffidence of love. Often Mahbub felt that he was too poor in spirit to love Marzeena. What after all did he have that he could ask of life the supreme gift of love? And yet at other times he felt bold beyond compare. He was young and the world stretched before him. It was a princess of dreams he loved, but was not he himself a herald of a new era?

Tossed uncertainly between love and fear, Mahbub alternated his days in faith and doubt. He lost interest in the problems of metaphysics and realized that life contains more than the hairsplitting intellect. The intensity of young life drove him into the depths of his own heart. He searched every corner of his mind and sought to work a balance of his assets and liabilities. Peace, however, eluded him. Like a flame encouraged by high winds, the discontent in his heart also grew.

Mahbub's transformation could not escape even so absent-minded a man as Dr Alam. 'What has happened to you?' he asked. 'You no longer come to us as before, nor have you your former interest in the problems of philosophy. And yet you look as if the burden of the world's mystery is weighing you down!'

Mahbub did not reply: what answer could he give? It was true that he did not visit their house any more. When he had felt no special urge, he had often gone on the slightest pretext and in unthinking ease. Today, when all his heart yearned to go, when his desire was almost like a physical pain, he could not find the courage to go. At every step he was troubled by doubt and hesitation, and all his days were charged with secret pain. But who knew that even pain had such sweetness in it?

At last Mahbub poured out his heart to Dr Alam. The doctor was taken aback and remained silent for a while. To him, Marzeena was still his little girl. He could hardly feel that she was on the threshold of youth and stirred young men with a strange restlessness. A motherless child, Marzeena had been dependent on him for all her needs. There was yet no change in her

dependence and faith. She was to him a loving daughter, a girl full of laughter and play and the joy of life. Clouds at times brooded over her, but they seemed to him only the shades of girlish fancy.

After a pause, Dr Alam said, ' You know that I look on you as my own child. I would be glad if Marzeena married you, but I have never yet thought of it. To me she still seems the young child I have nurtured. I must find out if she is ready for marriage.'

Mahbub's heart was full of dreams. He had painted the world with his own vision. He felt confident that love must find its response. If it were not so, life would be a mockery. Without a moment's hesitation he said, 'There can, of course, be no talk of marriage unless Marzeena herself is willing. But does she not know that I love her with all my being?'

It did not take long to discover that she did not know. Marzeena was amazed when Dr Alam asked her. She had nothing to hide from her father and asked, 'Marriage, but what for?'

There was nothing further to say. Mahbub had dreamt of love and his dreams had centred on Marzeena. Marzeena had her own dreams, but as yet there was no place for love in them, and certainly none for Mahbub. She was complete in herself. The daily acts of life fully satisfied her. Engrossed in herself, she had paid hardly any attention to the change in Mahbub. Mahbub's declaration of love seemed to her both unexpected and undesired.

## VI

Equally suddenly Marzeena discovered one day that the world did not exist for her alone. One morning it happened that Dr Alam did not get up in time. His life was one of clock-like regularity. Surprised at this sudden breach of habit, Marzeena went in to wake him. She called him, but there was no reply. A sudden fear tore at her heart. When the doctor came and told her that he would never wake again, Marzeena could not at first comprehend. It seemed to her that familiar words had lost their meaning. She heard the sounds but they had no significance.

But still Marzeena had to accept the fact. Death spares none. Nor does it ever stay its hand. Marzeena had to submit to its decree and arrange her days as best she could. The first reaction on her mind was one of utter emptiness. It was more a sense of vacuity than of agony. Familiar scenes change completely when a landmark is removed. Marzeena's life was transformed and appeared to her strange and meaningless. While Dr Alam lived his presence was never so vivid or intense. She had taken him for granted and never realized that he also had a distinct personality and life. His absence made Marzeena realize that it was she who had circled round him and not he round her. Like a pretty orchid that hangs on the mighty forest tree, she had perhaps added a little beauty to his massive strength, but that was all.

Her only living relation was an uncle and she had nowhere to go but his house. In a few days she realized

how helpless she was after her father's death. An only daughter, she had been the mistress of the house and lived in her father's affectionate care. There she had had her own way. Now she entered a family which had fixed modes of life and conduct. She felt not only a stranger but also unwanted and unnecessary. Her self-centred life had never taught her how to make herself useful to others. She could make for herself no place in her new environment. She remained an uninvited and unwelcome guest.

What troubled her most was the environment in which she found herself. Dr Alam's home ran smoothly and noiselessly like a well-oiled machine. The home was there an instrument for realizing other purposes. The home where she now found herself was different. Like a cart with creaking wheels, it proclaimed its existence from afar. Running the household was an end in itself. There was no lack of servants or maids. Their number and clamour only proved the defects of the domestic machine. Their labours and their wrangles started with the first gleam of day. They ended only when midnight had descended on earth.

Before long, Marzeena felt suffocated in the unaccustomed atmosphere. She wondered what engaged them all day long? She had not yet learnt that the best way of avoiding one's duty is to take on too many tasks. The maids quarrelled over the allotment of work. Hours passed before it was settled. There were complaints and counter-complaints. Marzeena's aunt spent half her day in settling rival claims. There was also domestic espionage. The servants and the maids vied with one another

in reporting to their mistress. Little boys and girls stole one another's small possessions. This gave their parents fresh grounds for fighting. Cases and counter-cases complicated the whole domestic scene. When a cart settles in the mud and the bullocks cannot pull it out, the driver has to get down and put his shoulder to the wheel. Marzeena's aunt had often to intervene to make the domestic machine move.

The burden of work or its empty show cannot, however, fill the human heart. Man must, therefore, create forms of humour wherever he may be. The nature of the form depends upon the environment. A form that was genuine and adequate for her aunt palled on Marzeena's taste. It clung to the prime necessities of life and was content to express the bare facts of birth and death. In its robust vigour it reminded Marzeena of Elizabethan taste, but it lent itself to distortion easily, and then it became crude and vulgar. Slander and sexual innuendos were rarely absent in anything that was said or implied. Marzeena felt as if she belonged to another world. The crudities made her shrink within herself, and she felt her spirit wither.

One must not, however, judge Marzeena's uncle or aunt too harshly. They were ordinary people with no excess of either vice or virtue. In fact, there was little that was remarkable in them. Their life flowed along conventional channels. The aunt did not know even of the existence of Europe, and to the uncle it was a mere name. They knew nothing about its ways. Men and women who had adopted Western modes seemed to them beings from another planet. Marzeena, on the other

hand, looked at life through Western eyes. Her relatives appeared as strange to her as she to them. They tried to accept Marzeena and make her one of the family. This, however, could not be. Marzeena was too self-centred and complete in herself to fit into their scheme. Human nature can tolerate hatred, but not indifference or contempt. Nor is it any use trying to conceal one's feelings.

Marzeena's aunt often called her to join their gossip, but she invariably pleaded that she was busy. What after all could she discuss with her aunt? Her aunt had a limited horizon. Birth and death in the family, or perhaps illness and cure, were the only things within her ken. She hardly knew that there was a life outside domestic incidents. When she called Marzeena, Marzeena knew what she would say. She loved to describe the pomp that had accompanied Dr Alam's marriage. She discussed the bridegroom's dress and his absent-mindedness. Naturally, the talk would turn to Marzeena herself. Her aunt was terribly worried about her marriage. Marzeena was already seventeen. Would she remain a spinster? The servant maids would join in the talk. What exasperated Marzeena most was their commiseration at her childlessness. Seventeen and yet no child? If only her father had done his duty and married her at the proper time, she would by now have had children in her arms. They mildly accused Dr Alam. Who would now marry an orphan girl without wealth or family connexions? Bitter anger and helplessness filled Marzeena's mind. She felt afresh the loss of her father. He had abandoned her in a cheerless house among relations who were more alien than strangers.

While Dr Alam lived, Marzeena had never paid much attention to her studies. She felt amused at his interest in philosophy and his disregard for the affairs of life. She was proud of her father's erudition, but the pride had in it an element of tenderness and almost pity. How could one be a great scholar and yet a mere novice in worldly affairs? She had often laughed at his unworldliness, but now her memory was charged with tears.

Marzeena told her aunt, 'I want to continue my studies.' Her aunt was taken aback. What on earth could the girl mean? When Marzeena explained, she was shocked. For a girl of marriageable age to think of such things —she was so surprised that she could hardly speak.

After much debate, discussion and quarrelling, it was finally decided that Marzeena could have her way. Her aunt made a wry face. 'How can an aristocrat's daughter live in the house of poor relations like us?' she said. 'She will now take her degree and become a judge herself,' the maids chimed in. They exclaimed, 'Good gracious, we have never heard of any such thing. Such a grown-up girl and she will go alone to Calcutta and read in colleges like men? God alone knows what madness possesses the world and what novelty we shall still witness.'

Her aunt's sarcasm and the comments of the maids could not shake Marzeena from her purpose. She listened in silent but cold fury. This infuriated them the more. Anger and hatred in return for anger and hatred can be tolerated. It is intolerable when all anger and hatred is met with contemptuous indifference. Marzeena had to submit to sharp and painful ridicule, but her speechless patience triumphed. She left for Calcutta for her studies.

## VII

Needless to say that Marzeena could not have gone but for her uncle's secret support. He had a soft corner in his heart for his brother's child. He felt that after the free life in her father's home, she would chafe against his house and its old modes. But after all what could he do? Marzeena was now a grown-up girl. It was not possible to let her live alone, nor was it easy to marry her off suddenly. Arranged marriages are all right for child brides. They hardly know the world, and their opinions have little value. It was different with a young woman in her late teens. She could rebel and refuse to accept the marriage arranged for her. It was so easy for a Muslim girl to rebel if only she wanted. When the Vakil came and asked her if she agreed to the marriage, what was there to prevent her saying 'no'? Of course, this rarely happens. Whether she likes it or not, the bride invariably says 'yes' to the fateful question. But Marzeena was not an ordinary girl. Nor had she been brought up in conventional ways. Who knew what her philosophical father had taught her? He had no respect for convention and perhaps his daughter had caught his spirit. Marzeena's uncle thought it over and decided that it was better for Marzeena to continue her studies. She could marry according to her choice, or continue with her studies, as she liked. There are Hindu girls who devote their life to scholarship or social service. Why should not Marzeena be the first Muslim girl to do likewise?

Marzeena went to Calcutta for her studies. It was decided that she should stay in a women's hostel. This

seemed best in the circumstances. The arguments against her living with strangers or distant relations were strong. A beautiful young girl would create problems in any household. Marzeena herself felt relieved. A boarding house might not be so comfortable, but she could avoid both familiarity and inquisitiveness. Life in her uncle's house had taught her that affection itself could turn into tyranny.

A few days in the hostel made Marzeena feel that she had regained the freedom of her father's house. Once she had bolted the door of her cubicle, she was cut off from all relation with the outside world, and free to indulge in her dreams and memories. The quiet intimacy of her secluded room was more attractive than the anxious care of fond relatives. Relations demand affection in exchange for love. They are offended if their services are not returned. Her room offered her quiet, but demanded nothing in return. What a comfort it was to feel that she had nothing to do with the outside world! Marzeena brooded over the days of her childhood. She remembered the care with which Dr Alam had surrounded her. He had created round her a world of freedom in which she soared like a bird in the boundless sky. The past was cloudless and the future was spread like a spotless day. Against the vast freedom of time, the present was full of the thrill of life. Now, across the years, episodes of her past life shot into her consciousness like sharp cameos.

Marzeena intrigued and attracted girls in the hostel by her quiet self-centredness. She, however, retained her solitude. She had passed her childhood alone, and

loneliness had become ingrained in her. She now built up an unscaleable wall through her loneliness. Invisible obstacles are the more difficult to overcome. Young women who sought her friendship were often repulsed by her loneliness. Some were offended. Some were hurt and some indignant. Some, however, would not be refused. They became all the greater admirers as they could not reach the core of her personality.

It is not that Marzeena had built up her isolation deliberately. She was naturally solitary. This gave her words and actions a stamp of distance and alienness. Those who liked and admired her found in her the suggestion of great mystery. Those who did not, charged her with pretence and artifice. All the girls were going to a cinema on one occasion. Marzeena was feeling depressed and said that she would not go. Even this became a topic for debate and discussion. Her critics said, 'Look at her vanity! We are all going, but she must prove that she is different.' Others said, 'Why blame her? Who wants to go to such vulgar pictures?'

Marzeena's days in the hostel would have passed, if not happily, at least without regret. If her companions proved too inquisitive, she was free to retire to her cubicle and shut herself off. Then she was alone with her thoughts and dreams. She could create her own space and console herself with the thoughts of poets, dramatists and writers of many countries.

Perhaps her life would have flowed in tranquil uniformity, but it was not to be. Mahbub suddenly reappeared from nowhere. Marzeena was standing on a balcony overlooking the street. The road in front was full of restless

movement. Vehicles of all types jostled the crowds of men. It was getting on towards evening and the glow of light was becoming dim. Summer had held the city in a tired swoon throughout the long midday and afternoon. With the approach of evening, the throb of awakening life could again be felt. The sun had shone with relentless might throughout the day. There was hardly a speck of cloud in the sky. The whole city was dizzy with the heat. The roads radiated fire and the walls of the houses were like hot bricks. Now the worst was over. The burning current had now slowed down. New sparks no longer hit the eye and the promise of evening brought a sense of cool relief.

Marzeena was standing on a balcony on the first floor. Her eyes were still heavy with the tired sleep of the summer day. There was a touch of sadness in her youth. The loose hair that framed her face gave her an air of lonely helplessness. Before her flowed the moving crowds—an endless current of nameless and featureless humanity. The mob had no specific character or shape. Individuals had lost their distinctiveness and became impersonal. Out of that mass of undifferentiated men, a pair of eyes, suddenly focussed on her. The crowd was dispersed and the individual stood out in his distinctive character. With a quick shock of joy, Marzeena saw that Mahbub was standing on the pavement. Marzeena stood upon the balcony while Mahbub floated past like a hyacinth in the current of the flowing crowd. Time suddenly lost its flow and was petrified. The moving crowd was transformed into static suspense. The present forgot the frenzy of its suicidal rush and returned in search of the immortal past.

There was a touch of dream in Marzeena's eyes. She was not looking at Mahbub nor seeing him. She saw the vanished days of her youthful life. She felt refreshed by the affection with which her father had protected her from the storm and stress of life. She remembered the days of careless freedom in the protection of his boundless love. She saw in Mahbub a symbol of memory. He stood for the joy, freedom and affection of those vanished days.

She looked at Mahbub for perhaps a bare moment. But can the flow of time be measured through minutes ? She came to herself and suddenly remembered her father's words. Dr Alam had told her of Mahbub's love and his desire to marry her. A flood of shyness swept through all her body. The blood rushed to her face and her eyes dropped. She turned her face away and with quick light steps vanished from the balcony.

Mahbub's love for Marzeena had become dim through absence. Human love is perhaps like a stream. If the fulness of experience does not feed it every day, it tends to dwindle like a river whose springs have dried up. The trivial words and acts of every day are like streams that aid the main current which broadens to the sea.

Mahbub's love was like a flowing stream. It did not have in it the massiveness of a forest tree. Forest giants drive their roots deep into the earth through days, months and years. Through days, months and years, they patiently and massively draw the sap of the earth and achieve their strength. How can one expect such deep and abiding strength of love in the self-centred dreams of adolescence and youth ? Had Mahbub really

known Marzeena? Whom had he loved? Was it Marzeena or the symbol of his dreams?

And yet it is certain that Mahbub had loved Marzeena. On the golden threshold of youth, Marzeena flamed into his horizon like the symbol of his dreams. In a moment, the vague and formless nebula of sentiment was transformed. The new world was gradually taking shape in his heart. Through desire and pain, through passion and fear, a new fire raged in his heart which held the promise of a new world. Before the process was complete, before the new world could be born, Marzeena vanished out of his life. What wonder then that his love lacked the depth and constancy which only the knowledge and intimacy of every day could give?

The dried streams of summer suddenly overflow with the advent of the rains. Mahbub was overwhelmed with a new flood of affection and yearning. Mahbub saw that Marzeena's eyes were full of dreams. He saw that her face was crimson with shy tenderness. The love which had dimmed in absence again shone bright and radiant. His heart rang with a triumphant bridal march. His lost love had returned. The old days of disdain were over. The morning snows had been touched with glory; the pale purity of virgin snows was shot with radiance. The world shone with the promise of new life and colour.

## VIII

Mahbub felt a new urgency of life. In his blood coursed the rhythm of a new joy. His life was lit with

laughter and a halo transfigured the familiar world. Marzeena could no longer remain unmoved. She felt his joy and desire flow over her, like the waters of a stream in flood. She discovered to her surprise that there were new claims on her. And she herself felt a new void in her heart. The admiration of her friends was no longer enough. Even the memory of her father was becoming dim. The hours of her leisure were charged with a new longing and expectancy.

When she had seen Mahbub among the other boys, he was only one among many. She had neither the will nor the occasion to think of him as an individual. When she learnt of Mahbub's love for her, she looked at him with a new curiosity. Before her curiosity could be satisfied, the ways of her life changed. Her interest had no chance to develop into any deeper feeling. Her father's death shattered her house of dreams and forced her to live among strange relatives. Her fate overwhelmed her and she lacked the energy to think of anybody else. How then could she remember Mahbub who had offered her his love? And yet she could not altogether forget him. The many young men who had visited her father slowly faded in her dreams, but one among the phantom figures would not quite dissolve. Shadowy and yet apart, Mahbub hovered in the twilight of men and when she least expected it, lit up the monotony of her life.

When she saw Mahbub on the road, her first feeling was one of surprise, but it soon passed. A flood of shyness swept through her body and mind. She suddenly felt overwhelmed with a strange and sweet sadness. Her heart was full of music and a new splendour filled her

days and nights. Mahbub's love had hardly touched her in the past, but today, in changed circumstances, that love became the richest possession of her heart.

She did not hesitate when Mahbub walked up to the hostel and wanted to talk to her. For a moment she thought of the rules, but soon made up her mind and with firm steps came down to meet him. 'Where have you been so long?' she asked. Mahbub's eyes lit up with the happiness in his heart. He tried to keep his tone level, but his voice was full of joy as he asked, 'And where have *you* been, Marzeena?'

He was surprised at his own temerity. He had called Marzeena by her name and he had talked to her as a familiar friend. And without any thought or deliberation. Without her permission, what right had he to address her thus? And yet how else could he talk to her? She did not seem to mind and had easily accepted his friendly greeting.

Marzeena said, 'This is hardly the place to talk. Wait for a few minutes till I get ready. We shall go out and then we can talk.'

Mahbub could hardly believe his ears. Was he listening to the Marzeena of flesh and blood for whom he had longed? Or was it only an embodiment of a dream? Was he awake or asleep? Would he wake and discover himself in his narrow bed in his dull and uninteresting hostel? His life had been full of yearning and unfulfilled desire—yearning that was acute like physical pain. Was it his longing that found embodiment in voice and shape?

Mahbub with a start came to himself. He was standing alone on the steps. Was it then a dream which had

ended? A dream which was so transient and easily shattered? A deep sorrow descended on his mind. He doubted his own experience and was about to turn away when Marzeena reappeared and said, 'Let us go.'

The rest of the story is simple. When Marzeena returned to the hostel, she found that judgement had been passed against her. The wrath of the authorities did not affect her. Her life was full. A new glow of joy covered her like impenetrable armour. What did she care for punishment or criticism? She could hardly feel the pin-pricks attached to violation of petty rules. A report against her was sent to her uncle. He hastened to Calcutta and heard everything. Marzeena's only reply was, 'It was my father's wish that we should marry.'

They were married and without delay. Her uncle did not object and why should he? Her aunt made taunting and sarcastic remarks. Like water flowing over the body of a duck, they did not touch Marzeena. It was curious, but these taunts revealed the human being in her aunt. For the first time, Marzeena could understand her aunt. She saw that her aunt was aging and it was growing age that made her so impatient and cruel. She had prided in her youth and beauty, but now they were both fading. With no other interest in life, the future held no promise, and the past was turning into a memory. Her life had passed in the usual conventional modes. The approach of old age was terrifying and without any consolation. Marzeena felt a sharp twinge of sympathy for her aunt. Her own life was full to the very brim. She felt that her joy knew no bounds. If she scattered the largesse of her heart to all the world, her joy would

still remain unbounded and endless. There was a new suggestion of joy in the sky and the air. The blood coursed through her veins with a new speed. Her heart was sensitive to new shades of exquisite pleasure. The memories of her youth came back to her and she remembered the affection of her father. She gratefully remembered the freedom which his love had brought to her. Today, however, there was no bitterness in these memories. Only a twilight of sadness full of exquisite sorrow and joy.

Thus had been her life and love. And yet Marzeena was today leaving her husband for good. Mahbub made no attempt to detain her. If he did, Marzeena would perhaps have defied him. Together they had built up their home. Today that home was shattered. There remained only the bitter memory of baffled effort. Once again Marzeena felt alone in the world. Alone she would have to go her way through life. She had built up her home with patience and care. In it had centred all her dreams. Today it was smashed to pieces.

Marzeena had always lived among her dreams. She came out of the world of her imagination only when she saw the challenge of a new life in Mahbub's eyes. Their world had been full of speech and promise. They had sensed the depths and heights of passion. Life's promise and dangers were both sharpened to a keen edge, but they had thought of themselves as immune and deathless. She had seen the dazzling beauty of lightning which plays against dark clouds, but had never imagined that its sombre beauty concealed thunder and death. Marzeena felt her eyes parched and her heart full of despair.

Life stretched before her and she would have to travel  
wearily and alone. The cup of life was drained. How  
could she sustain her heart against the cruel mockery of  
fate?

May, 1932

## SARDAR

It was early in February. The days of winter's rigours were almost over, but there was as yet no suggestion of spring in the air. The nights were still inert in the heavy, solid cold. The sky was dark with clouds of smoke and soot. Dust hung over the long and narrow lanes in the tenement areas around factories. Clouds of smoke gathered there throughout the year, but in winter they descended closer to the ground. Like a famished bear, they clasped in ferocious embrace the men dwelling there.

The darkness of the night held the earth in a dim shroud. In the eastern sky there was the faint suggestion of false dawn. The cock called out in its sleep and again quietened down. There was silence all around, but the tenement areas knew neither the repose of the night nor the peace of the morning. The hunger and desire of thousands of dissatisfied men and women poisoned their days and nights. They woke up in the mornings with bodies numb with weariness. The long days witnessed the toil of tired bodies. Evening brought them the stupor of joyless and unresponsive weariness. The atmosphere was heavy with the futility and frustration of famished lives.

In the half-darkness of the false dawn sounded the shrill whistle of the mill. There followed a feverish awakening of life among the sleeping tenements. The stillness throbbed with a new intensity. It was as if a hundred serpents were fuming in the dark. They could

not be seen nor touched. All around ruled their invisible but tangible presence. Thousands of men had collected there. Even in their tired sleep they were burdened with the urgency of work, and still more work. It was work without pleasure, without eagerness or satisfaction. It was the rebellious activity of thousands driven by the cruel torment of hunger. The mill's siren sounded like the cruel laughter of demoniac hunger. It was laughter in which there was no pleasure—laughter which dried up the springs of joy.

The tired workers clung to their beds. They wanted to cheat a few more minutes repose out of life's cruel demands. The bed's warmth held them in a lingering embrace, but time flowed on. The moments dropped like solid stones into the vacuum of time. The seconds ate steadily into their lives and demanded immediate fulfilment. They must rise to work. If they delayed and the factory gates were once closed, they would be without a job and without food.

The shrill cry of the siren roused Fazil Sardar with its first blast. Almost mechanically he rose from his bed. Suddenly he remembered that he need not get up. He need not go to work today. Suddenly he remembered that he had never been marked absent during the last forty years. Twice he had been home, but then he was on leave. Even then he had missed his work. He could not stay at home. Before his leave was over, he had come back to the mill. A strange simile came to his mind as he lay in bed. When Radha heard Krishna's flute, she forgot everything else and ran to the tryst. Was the mill-hand a modern Radha who could not resist the call of

the mill's siren? The rhythm of the machine stirred in his blood. With that rhythm he awoke in the morning. With that rhythm he moved throughout the day. Even his tired sleep was charged with the same monotonous rhythm.

In the end, Fazil Sardar no longer applied for leave. Of what use was a vacation to him? All his consciousness yearned for the factory. The whirr of the machines drummed in his ears. Every moment he seemed to hear the morning siren. He could see clearly before his eyes the workers falling into line in the courtyard of the factory. He felt the gates open. He could hear the bell ring and work start. There followed the dull steady clang of machines. Occasionally a muttered word came fitting in the midst of the dull mechanical noise. Occasionally he could hear a Sardar scolding his men. White taskmasters strode through in the pride of mastery. Fragments of pictures and scenes drifted into his consciousness. They weighed upon him till vacation turned into a nightmare of his life in the factory. He felt that he was swallowed by the machine and could have no existence outside the factory. He could not feel even his individuality apart from the mill. There was only the steady whirr of the revolving machine and the dull monotony of life circumscribed by cogs and wheels.

Fazil Sardar made as if to get up, but changed his mind and lay down again. Idle thoughts flitted across his mind. Could he ever have thought that he would go on strike and abstain from work? It was almost forty years ago that he had left his village in quest of work and food. His sole capital was his two strong arms and the

courage and enthusiasm of a young heart. Hard labour he had known. He had worked as a coolie when the railway line near his home was first built. Under the burning April sun, he laboured all day with spade and spike. Loads of rubbish and rubble he carried along the causeway. A hovel built of leaves offered him a sleeping den, but the day's work was exhausting and he was asleep almost before he lay on his hard bed. Before the previous day's weariness was gone, a new day would start, and he had to drag his tired body through another day's hard labour. Digging the earth and shovelling the loose earth : that was his life. The day dragged on till the evening shadows lengthened. The fires would then be lit and hurried meals cooked. The gnawing hunger that burnt their entrails would be dimmed but never die.

At last the causeway was built and the lines laid. The Sardar said that work would start on a new railway line. There was work for Fazil as well. Fazil had, however, had enough of it. He refused to work any longer on a line. Instead, he meandered to Calcutta and wandered about looking for work. He had neither acquaintance nor friend. How could he expect that people would give shelter or work to a stranger? He even thought of turning a beggar, but he soon found that begging was not an easy job. There were professional beggars and they knew all the tricks of the trade. Fazil's hand refused to stretch even when there was gnawing hunger inside. How could he expect that in a busy city like Calcutta, people would even look at him unless he rent the sky with moans and lamentations? Unless he made life miserable for all passers-by with entreaties and importunities?

These were hard and difficult days. Even now Fazil wondered how he had barely survived. A chance meeting with a man of his village saved him from sure death. He picked up Fazil from the street and found him a job in the factory where he was working. At first it was the work of a help-boy and Fazil had to slave to make four annas a day. He was sustained by the hope that when he learnt his job, he would be given work on a machine and earn perhaps half a rupee. There was even the prospect of rising to the position of a line Sardar. This seemed the limit of human ambition. His earnings would then exceed a rupee, and sometimes there were extras as well.

Even today Fazil remembered the inhuman labour for merely keeping on his job. Before the darkness of night had turned into the first half-light of dawn, he rushed to the factory and stood waiting for the gates to open. Often he had no time to wash the sleep out of his drowsy eyes. Winter and summer he waited before the factory gate. He remembered the tricks he had adopted to attract the notice and favour of the Sardar. He bought *biri* for the Sardar and offered him *pan* even though such luxuries were beyond his means. After the day's hard labour, his body refused to move and half-satisfied hunger would not let him rest. He would still attend at the Sardar's house and bring him offerings of fruit and sweet-meats. The Scotsmen who ran the mill seemed to him demi-gods. If ever he attracted the notice of one of them, his cup of happiness was filled to the brim. He felt he was ready to lay himself down beneath their tread. Even when he received kicks in return for his devotion,

he clung the more faithfully to the boot which kicked him.

Fazil suddenly remembered an incident of those early days. Mr Logan was one of the managers and noted for his rude manners and evil habits. One day he had kicked Ram Dhania for no fault of his till his cries and lamentations filled the sky and rose above the roar of the machines. Fazil could hardly stand it, but he bit his lips and stood in sullen silence. The blood trickled from Ram Dhania's back. Out of sheer tiredness his wails grew weaker. Logan was also tired of beating him but would not desist. After a last kick he turned to Fazil and ordered him to beat the blood-draggled Ram Dhania. Fazil could not stand it any longer and replied: 'Ram Dhania is almost half-dead. Why beat him any more, hazur?'

All Fazil's devotion and faithfulness was lost on Logan. He cursed and kicked wildly at him. Even the Sardar whom Fazil had tried so hard to placate looked at him with hard, cruel eyes. He leapt upon Fazil with loud curses and pushed him out of the factory. He drove Fazil to the gates and threw him out. Fazil heard but could hardly grasp the last angry words of the Sardar: 'You are fired. You dare to oppose Logan Sahib? If you try to enter again, you will be beaten till you are blue.'

Fazil returned to his tenement. Bitter thoughts of revenge stirred in his mind. He had done so much for the Sardar and yet the Sardar had turned so easily against him! He thought of attacking the Sardar at night. One blow of his *lathi* and the thing would be over. He remembered that the Sardar never went about alone:

he always had around him a crowd. If Fazil had the temerity to attack him, it would be Fazil who would suffer. A bitter resentment burnt in his consciousness. He thought of the ways he had served the Sardar. And yet the Sardar had taken the lead in humiliating him and throwing him out! He thought he would never work in the mill again. He would return to his home. After all he was alone. He could somehow make a livelihood.

He could clearly see before his eyes the picture of his village. The hard earth showed cracks under the burning sun. Small villages clustered dirtily together. In an earthen hovel lived his elder brother with all his family. One single room contained eleven souls. There was hardly room for him even to lay his head. A bitter smile came to his lips. His home was such that he could find no shelter to lay his head. In one corner of the courtyard was tied an old cow. Its bones stuck out. It had never had a full meal. The burning sun poured upon it. The scanty shade of the trees offered no protection. The scorched earth offered not a single blade of grass. All the days and all the years it was one unending struggle. It was a struggle against the hard barren earth and the burning sun. The peasants brought pitcherfuls of water from a distant well. They tried to soften the earth, but the soil remained hard and resisted the plough. By sheer weight they cut a narrow groove across the barren surface. Young, fresh shoots could hardly force their way out of such barren earth. He remembered the face of his brother, old before his time, with lines of care and struggle criss-crossed across

the skin. Their little plot offered hardly enough to maintain his brother and the children. If Fazil went and tried to get his share of the land, what would there be left? It was only because Fazil had given up his claim upon the land that his brother still lived. If he had not migrated from the village, perhaps by this time they would have all died of sheer starvation.

A weary sigh shook Fazil's frame. To return home was out of the question. What about Calcutta? he thought. A bitter smile quivered on his lips. It was not easy to forget his early experience in that cruel city. The roads of pitch had burnt the soles of his feet. Long rows of shops on either side contained all the goods of the world. The clubs and hotels contained people from every corner of the globe. In the midst of all this plenty, there was no room for a poor worker like him. He remembered how he had walked along the roads till his legs could hardly move. He remembered the weariness that dragged him down at every step. He remembered the agony of hunger that tore through his frame. Food and a little rest, where were they to be found for an unemployed vagabond like him! Through the window panes, he could see clothing of many colours and many qualities. He could smell food. He could not even look at the food for long. If he stood before a shop for more than a few minutes, a policeman came along and asked him his business and pushed him away with curses and kicks. Even begging was not an easy job, as he had learnt in the bitter past. The starvation from which he had suffered in his early days came back to him. He felt the pangs of hunger in his body once more.

Fazil could not think any more. His mind felt numb. It seemed to him that happiness or peace was not for mortal man. Why had the incidents of today happened at all? Why did Logan go berserk? Why did Ram Dhania utter such plaintive moans? Why had the blood trickled down his back? What cruel chance was it that turned the eyes of Logan towards Fazil? There were other men standing around who escaped his notice. Why not he as well? And what devil had possessed him that he dared to stand up against the orders of Logan? He could have pretended to beat Ram Dhania. Had he not seen the police wildly waving their sticks but not hitting hard? What would it have mattered if, he also had made a lot of noise but inflicted little pain? If only he had thought of this in time, he would have retained his job without injuring Ram Dhania.

Fazil lay on his bed and brooded over his fate. The day lengthened into evening. The light slowly thickened into darkness. With the fading light Fazil's anxiety also grew. He had been lying down and quickly got up. He looked into his meagre store and found that the flour, pulses and rice he had might last for another couple of days. He searched all his belongings and collected the few coins he had. They amounted to hardly two rupees. With economy, this might last him for perhaps another ten days. But once this reserve also went, what next?

A sudden thought shattered whatever little complacence he still had. The room in which he was sitting belonged to the factory. He had rented it as a worker in the mill. When he had lost his job, what right had he

to the room? Where could he go if he were turned out? Without funds or friends, the vast city was to him like a cruel desert. The idea of lighting the evening lamp had occurred to him. With the advent of this new thought, he lost all energy or hope. With a sigh of despair, he went back to the bed and stretched his limbs wearily. Perhaps he would escape notice if he did not light the lamp. No one would think of him and he could stay concealed in the enveloping darkness.

He dozed out of sheer tiredness and did not know how long he had dozed. The darkness was suddenly disturbed by the tread of heavy feet. The steps came right up to his room and he heard a muttered curse, 'The room seems dark—where has the rascal disappeared?' The darkness was shattered by the shrill voice of the Sardar as he called out, 'Fazil, are you at home?'

Hot lead seemed to pour into Fazil's ears. For a moment, thoughts of cruel revenge flared up in his mind. The Sardar had come alone. Such an opportunity would never be repeated. It was a thought that lasted hardly a moment and turned to cold horror as he thought of the future. All his broodings of the day flashed before his mind in a flood of disconnected images. For a moment he saw the blood-stains on the Sardar's head. The image disappeared as before his vision came the tattered cottage where he had been born. His brother's pale and weary face hovered for a moment and yielded place to the anaemic and pale visage of his brother's wife. The wails of half a dozen hungry children always searching for food rang in his ears. He saw again the hideous struggle of beggars on the streets of Calcutta. The images

crowded so rapidly that for a moment he was dazed. His stupor was broken as the Sardar shouted once more, 'Fazil, why don't you answer? Aren't you at home?'

Fazil rushed out of his room and threw himself at the Sardar's feet. He wailed, 'Save me Sardar, save me this once. Give me a beating if you like, but for heaven's sake, don't throw me to the wolves of hunger. If you don't save me this time, I shall starve to death.'

This was exactly what the Sardar wanted. He pretended to be angry and said, 'You impudent rascal, you try to fight against your superiors and then I must save you from the nemesis. If you lose your job, you have yourself to blame. How can I help you? I have come to tell you that you must get out of this room by tomorrow evening.'

Fazil's body turned stiff. His eyes flashed in wrath. The Sardar went on without noticing him: 'After all, I have always tried to do you a good turn. But you fellows don't realize what is to your own interest. Logan Sahib asked you to beat Ram Dhania. What harm would there have been if you had given him a couple of blows? If you really felt so much pity for him, you might have hit him without hurting him. Instead, you tried to stand up against Logan and now you must pay the price. And what good after all have you done? You did not agree, but Lajpat leapt up and beat Ram Dhania to his heart's content. Ram Dhania got beaten all right, and in the bargain you lost your job. Go to Logan Sahib's quarters now and you will find that Ram Dhania himself is there, entreating Logan to pardon him and offering to do whatever he might ask. They are all there. Only your

lordship is lying down at home as if nothing has happened. I have come to tell you that you must clear out tomorrow.'

The Sardar made as if to go away, but Fazil caught him by the hands and entreated, 'Sardar, I know no superior but you. You are my protector and employer. If you don't save me this time, I am bound to starve.'

The Sardar tried to free himself, but Fazil would not let go his hands. He fished out of his purse small coins amounting to a rupee and said, 'Sardar, this is your *selami*. I am giving you all that I have. Please lend me your protection.'

The Sardar took the coins and counted the change. His face brightened, but half incredulously he asked, 'Is this all you have? Are you certain that you have nothing more?' Fazil replied eagerly, 'I swear to God that if I have another pice, I am not my father's son.'

The Sardar hesitated no more and said, 'All right, come along with me to the officer's quarters. You must go and ask Mr Logan's pardon. Fall at his feet and don't let go even if he kicks at you. Tell him that you had received news from your country that your mother was dead. You were therefore frenzied with grief. You had no sleep last night and your head was aching with pain. Physical and mental agony turned your head and you did not know what reply you gave to Logan. He might, if you appeal to him, pardon you on this occasion.'

The Sardar proved right. They went to Logan's bungalow and found Ram Dhania sitting under a tree in his courtyard. Tears were trickling down his face, but

he uttered no word. His grief increased when he saw the Sardar, but he dared not utter a word. His whole body shook with suppressed sobs.

The Sardar asked in a sharp whisper, 'What is the matter? Have you done everything I asked you to do?' Without giving any direct reply, Ram Dhania beat his head upon the ground and with a dull, lifeless voice said, 'Yes, Sardar, from today my daughter will work in the Saheb's quarters. She will stay here and serve as desired by you.'

A cruel smile flitted across the Sardar's lips. He said, 'The job is then done. Haven't I asked you time and again to listen to me! Haven't I said that you will prosper and your daughter will also have a good time? You are now bound to become a Sardar yourself.'

Fazil felt as if his whole being was wrenched from its inmost roots. Bitterness flooded his body and mind. Ram Dhania's daughter, Lakhia, was the belle of the neighbourhood. Hardly fifteen, the advent of youth had already filled her body with the beauty of spring. Her restless eyes made the blood course in the veins of all the young men. Her light steps and youthful limbs haunted their dreams. The darkness of anger swept over Fazil, but with an effort he put all bitter thoughts out of his mind. What good would it do either to Lakhia or to him if he brooded over what must be? What was fated would happen. Lakhia must fulfil her destiny. In any case, what could Fazil do in the matter? All vain hopes and thoughts must be wiped out of his consciousness. He must remember that he was a coolie. A man who tended the machine must be like the machine and go

mechanically on. If his day's labour found him his day's food, what more could he demand ?

Fazil was awakened out of his reverie and heard the Sardar saying, ' You are in luck's way Fazil ; Logan is bound to be in a good mood and will readily pardon you.'

The Sardar once more proved to be right, but what a forgiveness it was ? Fazil could hardly bear to recall his experience of the day. Logan readily forgave him, but there was little joy at the restoration of his service. All thoughts of himself were submerged in bitterness when he saw a broken pathetic figure standing in one corner of Logan's room. He could hardly believe that it was the Lakhia he had known. Where was her youthful freshness ? What blight had wiped out every trace of life and beauty in that inert figure ? It seemed to him that it was not a human figure, but terror and loathing petrified into the semblance of a woman. With all his conscious will, he kept his eyes averted. He did not look up at all and tried to see only the tips of Logan's boots. Try as he might neither to see nor think about Lakhia, how could he push out thoughts that poured into his consciousness through all his senses ?

Fazil got back his job. Never again would he make such mistakes in future. His job was to tend a machine and like a machine he would work. The machine knew no worries. It had no hopes or fears. It was not troubled by any pain or pleasure. It went on revolving mechanically even though famine swept over the land and injustice and oppression turned human beings into broken bodies. The mills would go on spinning and weaving as long as the furnace was kept alive. It was unaffected by

whatever happened outside. Men who work in factories must be equally impervious to all change and suffering. What mattered if Lakhia was crushed in the processes of the mill? What mattered if all her hopes and dreams were shattered without hope of redemption? How in any case did Fazil come into the picture at all?

As he lay on the bed, Fazil remembered another day when Tewari got entangled in one of the machines. Tewari was a careless workman, but did the machine stop to set him free? Fazil could again hear the crackling sound as Tewari's arm was crushed and his shrieks rose above the creaking of the machinery. Without a moment's pause, Logan came forward, pushed Tewari away and ordered another man to carry on the process without a break. The shrieks of Tewari had pierced his ears, but Fazil hardened his heart and concentrated on his work. He dared not lift up his eyes lest his resolve weaken.

In a short time, Fazil had become notorious in the mill. There was no one more cruel or insensitive than he even among the hardened Sardars. The coolies used to look upon him with fear and hatred. They thought that he had lost his human qualities and turned into the steel of the machine which he so ruthlessly tended day and night. He did not long remain unknown to the authorities. They said that he had no equal in the factory for getting the job done. It was such a man that they wanted. He could drive the coolies harder than anybody else. Promotion to a Sardar's job did not take him long. He now returned to those under him the indignities he had himself suffered from Sardars. In fact,

they carry on the work? How long will it take them to learn the processes?

Fazil remembered fragments of such conversation continued night after night. These young boys came all the way from the cities. They discussed with him, argued with him and tried to convince him that all the wealth of the owners was built out of the labour of the workers. It was because the workers were exploited that they remained poor while the owners grew richer every day. The processes were carried out by the mill-hands and the Sardars. Yet it was young officers like Jackson or Thompson who issued orders. They argued with Fazil and appealed to his vanity. They brought in the personal questions he would avoid. How could he stand it when these youngsters bossed over him? Ordered him about and insulted and humiliated him in various ways? Did not his blood boil at such tyranny and oppression?

Old memories haunted Fazil. His eyes burnt and resentment filled his heart. But only for a moment. Despondency filled his mind again. In despair he used to reply, 'We were created for humiliation and insult. How can we go against our fate?'

Habib felt that the medicine was working. He used to remonstrate when Fazil talked of fate, 'Is not fate in your control? If men like you unite and demand that the owners shall not insult or abuse the workers nor tyrannize or oppress them, can the owners refuse? If you demand that they shall not mishandle the women-folk of the labourers, will these officers ever dare do so?' They used to argue the matter over and over again. The coolies worked

under the Sardar's control. If the Sardars once struck work, could these officers do as they liked? The coolies hardly knew the officers. If the Sardars issued the order, they would tear to pieces any officer who attempted to molest their womenfolk.

For a moment Fazil saw vividly before his eyes the image of Lakhia as she had stood in one corner of Logan's drawing room. In bitterness he thought of the fate of many Lakhias that he had known, and yet that first experience stuck in his mind like a stubborn thorn.

Slowly, almost unconsciously, the Sardar changed. New hopes and new ideas gradually possessed his mind. Unknown to himself, he became a new man. The irony was that today he was one of the leaders of a strike. Where was all his devotion to the owners? His anxiety to please his superiors? Today his only thought was to win the strike, to force the owners to accept the workers' demands. And what after all were their demands? Increase of a few annas in their wages. He bitterly thought of the many he had punished in the past because they had demanded such increase.

A dark thought crossed his mind. Suppose the strike failed. Suppose the management refused to accept their demands. Suppose they dismissed him and appointed a new Sardar and carried on work. The very thought made him feel empty and afraid. For a moment the idea of surrender flitted across his mind. There was yet time. He could yet stealthily cross the lanes and present himself at the gate. He could offer some excuse for being late. The gates of the old life were not yet totally blocked. The mood of despondency was challenged by another train of

thought. It would not be mere surrender—it would be betrayal. Could Fazil turn traitor at the fag end of his life? If he surrendered, the coolies who worked under him would hold him in contempt. They would brand him as a coward. The young boys who used to come night after night would never come to him again. They would shun him as a blackleg, a traitor, a liar.

Fazil heaved a deep sigh as he lay down again and stretched his limbs to their full length. He would not break his word. He would go through the strike. He would face whatever fate had in store for him.

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